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SEP 19 2007

IN THE CLAIMS

Claim 1. (Currently Amended) A network element, comprising:

a network processor equipped with a first processing environment and a plurality of network interfaces ~~configured~~ to operate on data received from a communications network, and route or switch the data between network interfaces as the data passes through the network; and

an intelligent interface including a second processing environment independent of the first processing environment of the network processor and capable of booting independent of the first processing environment of the network processor, the intelligent interface thereby being available to control the network element during a boot process of the first processing environment of the network processor, the intelligent interface further being equipped with an external communication port configured to interface with external resources using one of the Universal Serial Bus (USB) standards, and an internal port configured to interface with the network processor.

Claim 2. (Canceled)

Claim 3. (Original) The network element of claim 1, wherein the intelligent interface comprises a memory subsystem to enable the external port to store information independent of the network element.

Claim 4. (Original) The network element of claim 1, wherein the intelligent interface comprises a power source independent of the network element.

Claim 5. (Original) The network element of claim 4, wherein the power source is at least one of a power interface, a battery, and a fuel cell.

Claim 6. (Original) The network element of claim 1, further comprising an internal communications bus connecting between the network processor and the intelligent interface.

Claim 7. (Original) The network element of claim 6, wherein the internal communications bus is at least one of a PCI bus and a SCSI bus.

Claim 8. (Original) The network element of claim 1, wherein the intelligent interface is configured as an interface to an external storage resource.

Claim 9. (Withdrawn) The network element of claim 1, wherein the intelligent interface is configured as an interface to a supplemental security service.

Claim 10. (Withdrawn) The network element of claim 9, wherein the supplemental security service is provided by at least one of a biometric-based security device, and a security device configured to implement Rivest-Shamir-Adleman (RSA) algorithms.

Claim 11. (Withdrawn) The network element of claim 1, wherein the intelligent interface is configured as an interface to an external logging facility.

Claim 12. (Currently Amended) An intelligent interface for a network element, the network element including one or more network processors, comprising:

at least one external port;

at least one internal port connected with one of the network processors of the network element ~~configured to interface with a network element~~; and

a processor containing control logic ~~configured~~ to execute a first processing environment independent of a processing environment of the one or more network processors of the network element, the first processing environment including a kernel specifying an operational environment of the intelligent interface that will allow the intelligent interface to be active even when there is a failure associated with one or more of the network processors of the network element~~, and to control operation of the at least one external port and at least one internal port~~.

Claim 13. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 12, wherein the control logic is further configured to execute instructions to enable the intelligent interface to include a resource virtualizer configured to virtualize memory and storage resources to the network element.

Claim 14. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 13, wherein the resource virtualizer is configured to make external storage resources appear as local storage resources to the network element.

Claim 15. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 13, wherein the resource virtualizer is configured to partition the storage resources.

Claim 16. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 12, wherein the control logic is further configured to execute instructions to enable the intelligent interface to include a filesystem manager configured to perform resources management.

Claim 17. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 16, wherein the filesystem manager is configured to administer at least one of local storage resources and external storage resources.

Claim 18. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 12, wherein the control logic is further configured to execute instructions to enable the intelligent interface to include a network element management interface subsystem configured to enable the network element to be integrated with network element management software.

Claim 19. (Original) The intelligent interface of claim 12, wherein the control logic is further configured to execute instructions to enable the intelligent interface to include a port interface module configured to interface between the at least one external port and the at least one internal port.

Claim 20. (Withdrawn) The intelligent interface of claim 19, wherein the port interface module comprises an external port stack, a security subsystem, a health monitor, a configuration engine, and an internal port stack.

Claim 21. (Withdrawn) The intelligent interface of claim 20, wherein the external port stack is an interface stack configured to enable the external port to operate utilizing one of the Universal Serial Bus (USB) standards.